

SZABÓ, GYÖNGYI FÖLDESINÉ. *Félamatörök, Félprofik: Magyar Olimpikonok (1980-1996) (Semi-Amateurs, Semi-Professionals Hungarian Olympians)*. Budapest: Hungarian Olympic Committee, 1999. Pp. 221. Tables, bibliography.

I would have liked to see this book written in English for three reasons. On the one hand, this book should be of interest on this side of the Atlantic for historians, sociologists, and political scientists. It provides an interesting montage of a society in transition from a “socialist” (i.e. state controlled) to a capitalist (i.e. market) economy through the mirror of sport. It is an opportunity of a lifetime that provides an unsparing yet compassionate glimpse of a rapidly vanishing world—a mixture of bitter disappointments, selfless sacrifice, nostalgic retrospect, human excellence and drama, and official avarice.

On the other hand, the other compelling reason for having this book accessible in English is its power to put to rest the old controversy that sociologists cannot write good historical works and that historians deal with the lessons of the past only. The book also dispels the well-entrenched notion that “historians most of the time write books for themselves” while sociologists try to convince the world about how the world feels or should feel about itself. The author, a sociologist by training, follows the fate, aspirations, and broken dreams of nameless Olympic athletes, who brought glory to their country and who often paid a heavy price for it with their health and broken dreams. It is a sequel to two earlier works about Hungarian Olympians which have brought acclaim and praise for the author (Gyöngyi Földesiné Szabó, *Az Élsportolói Státus Magyarországon* [Budapest: OTSH-TSTT, 1983] and Gyöngyi Földesiné Szabó, *Magyar Olimpikonok Önmagukról és a Sportról* [Budapest: OTSH-TSTT, 1984]). In putting this together with her earlier works, Szabó provides a longitudinal study about a century of Hungarian Olympic participation with glory, warts, and all.

There is a third reason, but let me present it at the end of the review. Let’s just say that though she is careful not to identify her sources by name, the author does not shy away from controversy. After all, in a society which has just emerged from the shadows of forty years of Communism and its corresponding secrecy, and in a society where the intellectual as well as the sport elite knows each other intimately on a first name basis, topics such as homosexuality, gender issues, who used illegal substances, corruption within the leadership—just to mention a few touchy subjects—are still somewhat pioneering. Although these subjects might have been “untouchable” in the past, the fact that Szabó dares to open, ever so gently, the proverbial “Pandora’s box” should have not come as a surprise. Those who follow the evolution of sociology in Central and Eastern Europe know that Hungarian sociologists (more than historians!) have always been ferociously independent and in the forefront of the intellectual ferment which finally led to the disintegration of the Soviet empire. As the only representative of sport scholarship in the Hungarian sociology establishment, Szabó is well steeped in this critical tradition. Indeed, her earlier works were so groundbreaking and intriguing that, consequently, several spin-off studies resulted on both sides of the Atlantic.

This slender book is rich in details and meticulous in documenting the life and times of a whole generation of Olympians. It does so by letting the athletes themselves tell their stories. More importantly, it incorporates eighty tables—from early childhood influences to attitudes about boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, and from effects of sports injuries on one's career to social stratification of the spouses of Olympians not to mention numerous quotations from her extensive interviews with Olympians. But, what makes Szabó's work so compelling is the author's ability to compare, and often blend, social and political conditions, changing economic realities, deeply-rooted national consciousness, individual priorities, aspirations, and attitudes in a historical context, incorporating recent Olympic athletes with earlier generations of Olympians. The book entertains three major themes: 1) the major motivational forces in creating Olympic level athletes; 2) the complexities of representing one's country in the Olympic Games while entertaining individual aspirations; and 3) adapting to the new "economic order." Connecting these themes is the complex matrix of serious economic dislocations created by a rapidly changing socio-political system, and a consequent ideological disillusionment, bordering on outright cynicism. One needs to acknowledge though, and this study proves it, that the economic and political transformation of Hungary from a socialist country into a multi-party democracy did not start with the fall of the Berlin Wall, at least symbolically speaking. The roots of this disintegration had already started in the 1970s, further accelerating in the 1980s. The example of sport well documents this maxim. Just like in other spheres of life, a process of decentralization in sport started already in the 1970s resulting in a diffusion of elite sport to the provinces. This, in some degree, also promoted a certain degree of independence from central authority.

Szabó deftly navigates through some routine sociological topics. For example, in comparing the careers of two generations, the 1948-1976 and 1980-1992 Olympians, she finds glaring differences on every level; from children's socialization into sport to educational attainment, and from the function of sport in social mobility to divorce rates—especially among women. Much more controversial areas, at least in a Central European context, are her short chapters about the obvious culture gap about gender relations, and especially the definition and perception of sexual harassment in Hungary in comparison with the Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition. While no statistical data is presented, she is able to convey the prevailing views and attitudes toward this sensitive subject that, again, does not elicit such heated controversies as in America. A much shorter note deals with homosexuality that, however, is relegated to the private sphere because of deeply ingrained biases within Hungarian society.

The book also reveals how rocky and traumatic were the last three decades for the Hungarian Olympic movement and the individual athlete. In one of the richest chapters the author provides a touching picture of the disappointment and disillusionment of many of the athletes who were penalized twice—in 1980 and in 1984. The 1980 Olympic Games were boycotted by the United States and its allies—robbing, in some sense, the Moscow victors from the full recognition as Olympic champions. A more tragic picture emerges about the fate of those Hungarian athletes who prepared for four years in anticipation for the Los Angeles Olympics, only to learn thirty-seven days before the opening ceremony that their country joined the Soviet Union in staying away from the Games.

Considering that some of the managers and officials did go to Los Angeles, the multitude of interviews shows that the wound is still raw for many of the Olympic athletes: “You cannot reason about it [boycott]. Los Angeles is equally a disgrace for Hungarian sport history and a dishonor for the Hungarian sport leadership” (p. 86).

Encompassing the last ten years, the final chapters do not provide a lighter reading either. The author writes about the life of the Olympic athletes after their retirement from sport. It is not a pretty picture. For example, the issue of health is a prime question. We always knew, at least on the intuitive level, that highly competitive sports are hazardous to one’s health—even in a highly advanced society like the United States. With the collapse of the Soviet system that, in spite of its chronic inefficiency, at least provided a social safety net, life expectancy and health in general declined dramatically in Hungarian society at large. If one puts this in a European context, Hungarian life expectancy has been one of the lowest in Europe for the past two decades (The data shows that in the last two decades life expectancy has declined by four years in Hungary, p. 178). Yet, her study shows that the number of male athletes who “consider themselves healthy” is 32% versus 49% in the general population. Among female athletes the ratio is not much better: 23% in comparison to 32% in the general population (p. 178). These are frightening numbers because they also take into consideration educational attainment and socio-economic status. They reveal not only that high-level competition is unhealthy and that, indeed, athletes directly attribute their various illnesses to sport participation but also the empty lip service that is paid by sport authorities to the health of their best Olympians.

It is almost inevitable that I must conclude this essay on a gloomy note because I don’t think that her book will change too many minds, either in Hungary or here in America—at least not the mind of the person on the street. The hunger for money or glory, or both, is a most powerful aphrodisiac not to heed Szabó’s sobering statistics. But, this book needs to be read, at least by scholars and scientists for the third, and most compelling reason: to the best of my knowledge no one has ever attempted to present such a sweeping and comprehensive work of scholarship about such an important topic. But, then, it will be difficult to replicate this book, both in its scope, the quality of its scholarship, and its gripping message.

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